

(U) Was Amelia Earhart Really a Spy?

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(U) American History is filled with mysteries, both great and small. Some are rather esoteric and of interest primarily to historians, librarians, archivists, and the like. Others, however, capture public attention and have remarkable staying power. One such perennial topic is the fate of aviatrix Amelia Earhart and her navigator Fred Noonan, whose plane vanished as they were trying to land on tiny, remote Howland Island in the South Pacific in 1937. Interest in this nearly 90-year-old mystery has never completely faded, and renewed speculation over Earhart's doomed flight has flared up periodically, such as when a photograph surfaced in 2017 purportedly showing the pair on Jaluit Atoll, in the Marshall Islands—quickly dismissed by a Japanese researcher who found the photo in a Japanese-language travel guide published in 1935, two years prior to the ill-fated flight.



The purported photo of Amelia Earhart sitting on the dock at Jaluit Atoll, Marshall Islands, back to the camera, 1937; actual photo appeared in a 1935 Japanese-language book when she was still in the United States.

(U) Numerous theories exist, ranging from the somewhat plausible (she was captured by the Japanese and died of dysentery while in captivity) to the totally outlandish (she survived the flight and changed her identity) and everything in between. However, for those of us in the Intelligence Community perhaps the most interesting question is whether or not Earhart was on an intelligence collection mission at the time her plane disappeared. To cut to the chase, a review of both Agency and open-source information prompts the conclusion that she was *not* on an intelligence mission, for the following reasons:

1) No extant information in Agency records even hints at such a possibility, despite considerable interest from members of Congress and the public, who have repeatedly made FOIA requests about the fate of Earhart and Noonan. Fred Goerner, a San Francisco-based radio reporter for KCBS, was arguably the most determined proponent of the theory Earhart was a spy. In 1965, he, along with fellow reporter Ross Game from the *Napa Register*, came to Washington, DC “to dig up information on the Amelia Earhart story.” The following year, Goerner published *The Search for Amelia Earhart*, which postulated that Earhart and Noonan were on a spy mission approved by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and executed while in Japanese captivity on Saipan. Goerner further charged that the Navy, which he believed was stonewalling him on information, was “fronting, at any cost, for the CIA.” Not surprisingly, CIA Office of Legislative Counsel records from 1965 to 1967 indicate requests for information on the case were common, but there is no indication that any relevant information was discovered in response. There was an additional request in 1973, one routed from Congress to DCI George Bush in 1977, and further FOIA requests in 1986, 1991, 1994, and 1997, again with no referenced results.



Amelia Earhart and co-pilot/navigator Fred Noonan, Los Angeles, late May, 1937

2) In 1967, the Navy declassified hundreds of radio messages sent from Earhart's plane for several hours prior to its disappearance. The conclusion was that she and Noonan died at sea after they ran out of gas between 40 and 200 miles north of Howland Island, a one-mile-square target where no aircraft had ever landed before surrounded by waters 16,000 feet deep. The US Government spent two weeks and \$4 million searching for the pair, the most extensive search to that date in US history. Earhart was declared legally dead in January 1939.

3) Sometime between 1961 and 1971 (date illegible and lacking other confirmation), the CIA received a query from the office of House member and "FOIA father" John E. Moss. One of Moss's staffers was former Agency officer Vincent Augliere, referenced in the reply:

Mr. Augliere had inquired whether our files contain any documentation of the fact of an intelligence mission being assigned to Amelia Earhart on her last flight.

This is to advise careful research has been done and we can find no such documentation. The search included, of course, the files and records of the Office of Strategic Services since they are now in the custody of this Agency.

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4) According to a June 1982 *New York Times* article, Amelia's sister Muriel Earhart Morrissey told a National Air and Space Museum forum, "As far as I'm concerned she was not on a spy mission. She wanted to be the first woman to fly around the world. She wouldn't have been dishonest with the people who put up the money."

5) In his 1997 book *Amelia*, historian Donald Goldstein posits that Earhart would have been a most unsuitable intelligence officer. She "never had an hour's training in intelligence gathering, had no experience in photography beyond wielding the equivalent of a Brownie, and she would not have recognized a military objective worth photographing if she tripped over it."

6) Finally, there is the pesky question of what agency or organization would have recruited Earhart to conduct this supposed intelligence collection mission—in 1937, there was no Office of the Coordinator of Information, the birth of OSS was five years off, and the genesis of CIA a decade distant. In the mid-1930s, Earhart could have only been recruited by the US Army's Military Intelligence Division, the Office of Naval Intelligence, or—more unlikely yet—the FBI. The fact that there is no record of such a recruitment in the archives of any of these organizations prompts the conclusion that she was not on an intelligence collection mission at the time of her disappearance. The one counterpoint—addressed by several—is the possibility that President Roosevelt personally dispatched Earhart on her mission and that he remained silent about it when the plane vanished, seemingly also a long-shot.

(U) As a postscript to the lingering interest in this mystery, in 2015, Parker Hannafin Corporation sponsored an expedition to the Marshall Islands, which returned with six pieces of metal thought to be from Earhart's plane. However, the company has yet to release a definitive statement on its findings. Another tantalizing reminder of the continuing fascination with Earhart and her disappearance occurred in 2024, when Deep Sea Vision, a company that operates unmanned underwater vehicles, announced it had sonar imaged what appeared to be the remains of an airplane on the ocean floor near Howland Island. Subsequent exploration revealed the shape was a rock formation.

—By David Foy



Photo portrait of Amelia Earhart